Workplace Satisfaction Project

Performance Management Tools

Performance management is the system by which employees receive clear job expectations, their work is observed, constructive feedback is provided, and objective ratings of success are assigned to their performance. In practice, performance management tools are frequently undervalued and underutilized in the NPS. In large part, this often stems from managers being too busy to closely observe employee performance firsthand or take the time to formulate specific feedback. In such cases, only the most egregious failures are addressed, and only the most significant successes are celebrated. Additionally, there is widespread doubt in the NPS about the value of the Employee Performance Appraisal Plan as a valuable tool, and it is often used in marginal or useless ways as a result.

Managers under time pressure will often trust employees to do good work with little oversight or feedback, and usually this trust is well founded. However, a lack of regular feedback means that employees are often condemned to learn difficult lessons on their own – if at all – with little or no help. This is a major organizational inefficiency and an apparent cause of significant workplace stress.

Proactively helping employees get better at their jobs is arguably a supervisor's first responsibility, and certainly should not be triaged into nonexistence, as can too often be the case. All employees, whether motivated high performers or not, require attention, time, and feedback in order to succeed.

- All successful performance management relies on a firsthand knowledge of the employee's duties, challenges, and accomplishments.
- The EPAP is a widely disparaged tool in the NPS. However, as with any tool, it is only useful when used as intended. It requires work to create, but it is worth the time – it rewards high-performing employees with appropriate and specific recognition, and holds poor performers to clear and specific standards of competence.
    - Critical elements should be created thoughtfully, carefully, and with specificity, with an eye toward giving the employee a clear 'recipe for success'. Assuming that the employee 'knows what to do' and therefore requires no specific guidance is a grave mistake on the supervisor's part. Critical elements should be:
        - **S**pecific, clear and understandable.
        - **M**easurable, verifiable and results-oriented.
        - **A**ttainable, yet sufficiently challenging.
        - **R**elevant to the Mission and park/workplace goals.
        - **T**ime-bound with a schedule and specific milestones.
    - Benchmark standards should be provided at all performance levels, and should be clear and specific. A frequent employee complaint regards benchmarks that do not adequately differentiate between successful and superior performance.
    - If critical elements are well crafted and benchmark standards are clear, then numerical ratings should be easy, consistent, and accurate.
    - When supervisors value the EPAP as a means to clearly establishing performance expectations, it meets its intended purpose. When supervisors dismiss it as a wasted bureaucratic exercise and invest no time in it, it not only takes away the usefulness of the entire performance management system, it also undermines the employee's faith in the supervisor's ability to successfully manage them.
- Regular, informed, timely feedback is a critical component of employee performance growth. This can only be achieved by the supervisor investing time in directly observing the employee's performance, and providing specific and informed feedback on the basis of the observations. Anything less is of limited value and will not significantly help the employee grow or improve.

- Standards and evaluations among employees with highly similar jobs should be consistent, fair, and equally applied. Standards should be written to the duties and expectations associated with the position, not to an individual employee's relative strengths or weaknesses.

- Narratives regarding employee performance should be accurate and specific. This communicates careful observation of success to high performers, and puts low performers on notice as to careful observation of marginal performance. Performance assessments that are broad or nonspecific are meaningless and useless, and communicate to the employee that the supervisor did not invest time or care in the employee's performance.

- Asking an employee to 'write their own evaluation' or 'write up a list of the things they did this year' should be avoided. Such requests can easily indicate to the employee that their supervisor did not take the time to actively record or notice their accomplishments.

- Recognition of employee success should not wait until the end of the rating period to be observed or acknowledged. Recognition is most useful as a feedback tool when it is timely and specific. Employees may worry that no one noticed their success if it is not recognized within a short time after it occurred.

- While performance management may be often undervalued, thus leaving employees with the sense that no one is paying attention to them, the opposite end of the spectrum is at least as damaging to employee satisfaction. This is micromanaging, when employees feel smothered with overly intrusive or interfering attention. Micromanaging is rarely about performance management and often about misplaced senses of control or accountability, but it certainly negatively affects performance management as the employee does not receive clear messages about the fundamentals of their performance.

- Managers must provide guidelines for success, but they must also ensure that the tools and support necessary for that success are present. If the guidelines indicate the need for certain tools, skills, or knowledge to be present, and those are not provided, then the employee will simply not be able to perform to the standard.

- Performance management, especially in the case of poor performance, often involves conflict management. Holding employees accountable for failures and shortcomings is awkward, uncomfortable, and completely necessary. Developing conflict management skills will allow managers to have these conversations readily and skillfully, instead of avoiding them or handling them badly – either of which is likely to actually make the problem worse.

- Allowing marginal or poor performers to 'slide' on performance standards because it is easier than addressing the problem is tremendously poor management practice. It perpetuates and reinforces poor performance. It also reduces the morale of high performers; these employees have high standards for themselves, and are often outraged when other employees with low standards are given a 'pass'. Avoiding the problem will only make it worse in the long run.

- Managers should instill and foster a sense of continuous improvement in their workplace, a sense that ongoing training and learning are employee priorities.

- Managers are obligated to address employees with highly similar jobs equally and fairly. It is poor practice to take work away from an underperforming employee and give it to a high-performing employee in a similar position. Managers must simply ensure that all employees meet the standard, and those that do not must be corrected accordingly.

- Bottom-up evaluations, in which employees provide feedback and ratings for their supervisor, can be a very useful tool for identifying issues and growing a healthier workplace. They do require vulnerability and trust on the part of the supervisor, which are necessary qualities for supervisory success. Anonymous evaluations are not as beneficial, as they indicate poor trust relationships, but they can be better than none at all.

- The most common performance management rating errors made by supervisors across organizations of all types are:
  - o **Central Tendency.** Clustering everyone in the middle performance categories to avoid extremes of good or bad performance; it's easy, but it's wrong. This isn't fair to employees who are really making an effort, and it can be demoralizing.
  - o **Favoritism**. Overlooking the flaws of favored or "nice" employees, especially those whom everyone likes.
  - o **Grouping.** Excusing below-standard performance because it is widespread; "Everyone does it."
  - o **Guilt by Association.** Rating someone on the basis of the company they keep, rather than on the work they do.
  - o **The Halo Effect.** Letting one positive work factor you like affect your overall assessment of performance.
  - o **Holding a Grudge.** Never try to make employees pay for past behavior.
  - o **The Horns Effect.** The opposite of the Halo Effect—letting one negative work factor or behavior you dislike color your opinion of other factors.
  - o **Bias**. Allowing your bias to influence the rating. Bias can come from attitudes and opinions about race, national origin, sex, religion, age, veterans' status, disability, hair color, weight, height, intelligence, etc.
  - o **Recency.** Rating only recent performance, good or bad. Data should be representative of the entire review period. If you're not keeping good notes, you may not remember the whole period.
  - o **The Sunflower Effect.** Rating everyone high, regardless of performance, to make yourself look good or to make them feel good.
  - o **The Similar-to-me Error.** Similar-to-me error is when the rater's tendency is biased in performance evaluation toward those employees seen as similar to the raters themselves. We can all relate to people who are like us but cannot let our ability to relate to someone influence our rating of their employee performance. Since human biases can easily influence the rating process, it is important to create objective measures for rating performance. Observing behaviors and using available technology to help track performance can take some of the biases out of the rating process.
  - o **The First Impression Error.** First impression error is the rater's tendency to let their first impression of an employee's performance carry too much weight in the evaluation of performance over an entire rating period. An example of this would be a new employee joining the organization and performing at high levels during their "honeymoon" period and then possibly losing some of that initial momentum.

- 'Coaching', in addition to being an excellent performance management tool, is also an excellent employee growth tool. Supervisors should embrace coaching skills as they effectively engage the employee, provide clear expectations and feedback, and move positively toward desired results. A broad coaching model for addressing performance or behavior is:
  - o **Put the employee at ease.** This step is important when the coaching session is a response to poor performance - it's not as important in other situations.
  - o **Find out what they already know.** There are two reasons for this. First, there's little use in telling them what they already know. Second, prior knowledge serves as the foundation for new knowledge that's acquired. Hence, you want to link the «training» to what they already know and correct any misconceptions that could interfere with their learning.
  - o **Present information or demonstrate work methods.** This is the point where you deliver the content of the training.
  - o **Repeat.** Repetition enhances understanding and retention.
  - o **Evaluate learning.** Test whether the employee understands the information or can perform the skill.
  - o **Provide feedback**. Let the employee know what they have successfully learned and what they still need to learn.
  - o **Correct.** Show the right answers or methods again.
  - o **Evaluate performance on the job.** Periodically check to see whether the employee is using the knowledge or skills effectively on the job. Gradually increase the interval at which you check. The employee should eventually take responsibility for monitoring their own performance.
  - o **Reward.** Provide praise or other rewards for successful acquisition and use of the knowledge or skill